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STATE FOR NEA, S/CT, INL, PM, AND DS;
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SCENESETTER FOR ELIAS MURR'S JULY 16-19
WASHINGTON TRIP

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S/NF) Just over a year since surviving what is thought to have been a Syrian-ordered assassination attempt, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr heads to Washington July 16-19. The scion of a powerful and wealthy Greek Orthodox family closely linked to Syria, Murr has forged an independent path broadly consistent with USG hopes for an independent Lebanon. He supports close security cooperation with the USG. He is privately hostile to Hizballah and advocates for a strong Lebanese army and Lebanese state to stand up to Hizballah. As Minister of Interior two years ago, he displayed unusual courage in ordering the arrest of Sunni extremists linked to Syria. Yet Murr's enthusiasm for highlighting his own role sometimes leads him to exaggerate or suggest expertise he may not possess.

2. (S/NF) Murr's visit coincides with growing fears in Lebanon that the ongoing political stalemate is leading to renewed sectarian violence. By receiving Murr at high levels in Washington, we reassure the Lebanese that the United States supports a strong Lebanese army (the LAF), arguably the only national institution with popular support that crosses sectarian lines. After the visits of Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Fouad Siniora, Ashraf Rifi and Ahmed Fatfat -- all Muslims -- to Washington, Murr's visit also provides a modicum of sectarian balance. As Deputy PM, Murr occupies the second-most-senior Christian office in the GOL. (Murr's former father-in-law, President Emile Lahoud, disreputably occupies the first.)

3. (S/NF) By sharing our thinking for assistance to the LAF and by announcing -- if possible -- Section 1206 assistance and plans for out-year help, we provide encouragement to Murr and the LAF to continue modernization and training to prepare for deployment over all Lebanese territory in the future. We also give Murr an example to use in pressing other foreign partners for help to the LAF. Ideally, Murr should leave Washington feeling not only strengthened but also sobered: he needs to see that the levels of USG support for the LAF are linked to tangible progress both on security reform/coordination and on eventual disarmament of militias. We suggest that Washington interlocutors press Murr in particular on how he envisions implementing the National Dialogue's decision on disarming Palestinian militants outside of the refugee camps and issues related to UNIFIL

renewal. End summary.

MURR'S VISIT CAN COMBAT PERCEPTION
THAT FATFAT'S VISIT WAS A "FAILURE"

14. (S/NF) Pro-Syrians in Lebanon have viciously -- and successfully -- spread the story that Acting Minister of Interior Ahmed Fatfat's June visit to Washington was a failure. Fatfat, they argued, returned to Lebanon empty-handed. Despite Fatfat's private and public praise for the trip, the charge has stuck. With exaggerated expectations about the translation into dollar amounts U.S. support would supposedly take, the Lebanese were susceptible to the nefarious argument that our unprecedented assistance to the ISF (through INL, FBI, ATA, etc.) is insignificant. Both Fatfat and Internal Security Forces (ISF) Commander Ashraf Rifi (who also visited Washington earlier in June) insist that U.S. support is important and welcome. But their words are drowned out in the Lebanese chorus that our tangible commitments supposedly do not match our rhetorical support for Lebanon. Acting Interior Minister Fatfat has authority over the ISF and Surete Generale, while Murr has authority over Lebanon's third major security institution, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

15. (S/NF) Given this (tiresome but predictable) perception that Fatfat's visit was a failure, we hope that something specific can be announced (assuming all approvals are in place) during Murr's visit: the nearly USD 10 million in Section 1206 funds, to be obligated in this fiscal year. We recommend that hints be made that, subject to congressional approval, this is part of a multi-year, multi-million dollar effort to provide support essential to the modernization of

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the LAF and support state-building activities.

16. (S/NF) We are aware that there is preliminary thinking in USG circles suggesting that the USG consider giving Lebanon USD 20 million in FMF for each of the next five fiscal years. As a mission, we strongly support this proposal (and, in fact, are including this figure in our assistance dialogue with Washington). Particularly in light of the USD 1 million in FMF this year (the first time FMF has been offered to Lebanon in more than a decade), these figures demonstrate the type of commitment that would electrify public opinion in a positive way here.

17. (S/NF) Thus, we hope that there could be some way to use Murr's visit to make a reference to the possibility of a USD 110 million commitment to the LAF over the next five years (Section 1206 for this year plus FMF for the next five years). Depending on what IMET numbers are under consideration for Lebanon, this multi-year package could be even higher. Even if these figures are too preliminary to be stated publicly, we encourage an honest discussion of our thinking with Murr. Murr can then quietly share our thinking with PM Siniora and others, showing that the strong support the President offered Lebanon during Siniora's April visit might, subject to appropriations, materialize in increased help to the LAF.

MURR'S VISIT CAN REASSURE CHRISTIANS

18. (S/NF) As Deputy Prime Minister -- a position reserved for a Greek Orthodox -- Elias Murr is the second-ranking minister, just after PM Siniora (a Sunni), and the most senior Christian cabinet member. General Michel Aoun and pro-Syrian Christian politicians like former MP Suleiman Franjeh argue that U.S. invitations to Muslim politicians, combined with our boycott of the presidency (a Maronite Christian), "prove" that we are implicated in marginalizing Lebanon's Christians.

¶9. (S/NF) Adding fuel to their fire, the pro-Syrian fearmongers are now trumpeting the fact that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, visiting the United States, has not been invited to Washington. Instead of accepting our explanation that the Patriarch was already received by POTUS in March 2005, the Christians fear that we have "demoted" the Patriarch's status by "ignoring" him this time. Thus, by highlighting Murr's visit, we take some of the sting out of the alleged snub of Sfeir and restore some confessional balance, after the visits of Sa'ad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Siniora, Rifi, and Fatfat (all Muslims).

SUPPORT TO LAF ALSO REASSURING

¶10. (S/NF) The support we show during Murr's visit to the LAF, traditionally commanded by a Maronite Christian and with a strong (but not exclusively) Christian officer corps, is also part of the reassuring message to the Christians, who fear that the Sunni-commanded ISF is growing in strength at the expense of the LAF. While traditionally considered a Christian institution by virtue of its command, the LAF is in fact one of the few -- many would say only -- Lebanese national institutions that is truly cross-confessional and that has the strong support from Lebanese representing all of the bewildering confessional landscape here. Receiving Murr prominently amounts to symbolic support for the LAF.

¶11. (S/NF) In addition, by receiving Murr and announcing generous additional help for the LAF, we stand with an institution that should be a model for confessional co-existence in Lebanon. The fearful Christians will welcome this message, as well other segments of Lebanese society. Christians in particular, but Lebanese more generally, see a strong LAF as the best insurance against the growing confessional tensions becoming violent.

MURR'S VISIT CAN ALSO SOW UNEASE IN RANKS OF PRO-SYRIANS

¶12. (S/NF) Because of the car bomb that nearly took his life on 7/12/05 -- approximately one year ago -- Murr has also become a surprising symbol of Lebanon's struggle for

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independence. He, Marwan Hamadeh (survivor of a 10/1/04 car bomb), and LBC journalist May Chidiac (badly maimed in a 9/25/05 car bomb) are dubbed "living martyrs" by the Lebanese pro-independence forces. This term is meant both to honor them and to distinguish them from those actually killed (like Rafiq Hariri). While no one has been arrested in the case of Murr's attack, in the court of popular perception Syria is judged guilty. Murr himself is convinced that the Syrians, aided by Hizballah-organized surveillance, tried to kill him -- and will do so again, if given the opportunity to do so without leaving fingerprints.

¶13. (S/NF) In the small world of Lebanese politics, many of the victims of the 2004-2005 bombings are connected: Murr is the ex-brother-in-law of Gebran Tueni, the al-Nahar publisher and MP killed on 12/12/05, and thus the uncle of Nayla Tueni, the 20-something daughter of Gebran who took on the role of family spokesman after Gebran's death. And Marwan Hamadeh, as the uncle of Gebran (whose mother was Marwan's celebrated sister Nadia), also is part of this tragic family circle. Admitting to a shared "survivor's experience," Marwan and Elias have drawn close, politically and personally. Early in her career, May Chidiac worked for Elias Murr, and the two remain friends. Murr's visit to Washington will thus be seen -- rightly -- as a reproach to the Syrians for trying to eliminate Lebanese politicians and journalists. To our satisfaction, Lebanon's resurgent pro-Syrian politicians will be uncomfortable with Murr's Washington consultations.

PROGENY OF A PRO-SYRIAN POLITICAL BOSS

¶14. (S/NF) Murr is a particularly fascinating character because of the political trajectory he has traveled. Lebanon's pro-independence politicians did not immediately embrace him, given his past. Murr was seen as a key figure in the Syrian-Lebanese post-Taif status quo. His powerful father Michel, a political boss (in the Mount Lebanon Metn region) now part of Aoun's parliamentary bloc, built a billion-dollar real estate empire through questionable tactics and cozy relations with the Syrian-Lebanese security regime.

¶15. (S/NF) Murr himself was married until recently to the daughter of Lebanon's discredited president, Emile Lahoud. When Siniora was putting together his cabinet a year ago, in fact, Murr was one of three men (along with Charles Rizk and Yacoub Sarraf) included as "Lahoud's ministers," the price Siniora had to pay in order to gain the essential signature of Lahoud on the cabinet decree. Murr, like many in the Syrian-Lebanese establishment circles, even had a brush with the notorious Bank al-Medina, selling his house at well above its appraised value and earning a brief mention in the Central Bank's investigation report into the collapsed bank. (Murr has gone to court to deny any wrong-doing, claiming that the contents of the house were included in the sale. The case is pending.)

BOMB BLAST RE-ORIENTS HIS POLITICS

¶16. (S/NF) With a talent for revisionist history, Murr would deny that he was ever as blindly pro-Syrian as his former reputation suggests. He has talked sorrowfully -- and we believe sincerely -- about the emotional pain he experienced since his attack, breaking politically with his father and father-in-law and going through the collapse of a 15-year marriage while undergoing more than a dozen surgical procedures since the car bomb attack. Whether he was always quietly a genuine Lebanese patriot in a pro-Syrian milieu or rather was blasted from one side of the political spectrum to another is now a moot question: he has readily proven his credentials since his attack to be an independent, pro-independence minister. He has been increasingly vocal, publicly and privately, about the need for Lebanon to stand up to Syria, the Palestinian rejectionists, and even to Hizballah. When asked how he could so easily abandon his previous alliances, Murr talks about trying to cross a busy highway: if you stop halfway across, you will be killed; you need to dash all the way to safety on the other side. (We would argue, of course, that Murr was literally blasted from one side of that highway to the other.)

¶17. (S/NF) Ministers in the cabinet with the strongest

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pro-independence credentials -- Nayla Mouawad, Marwan Hamadeh, etc. -- all agree that Murr now stands aggressively on their side in cabinet decisions, voting against the wishes of Lahoud and the pro-Syrians. (Revealing presidential ambitions, Charles Rizk has made a similar trajectory, although without going as far as Murr. Lahoud is now left with only the ridiculous Sarraf as "his man" in the cabinet.)

By February 14 this year, Murr was formally ushered into the pantheon of those who sacrificed for Lebanon's independence, when his name was added to lists being chanted in a mass demonstration in Martyrs' Square. PM Siniora, too, was initially suspicious of Murr but has lately counted him as an ally, citing Murr's sacrifice in a speech he gave on the occasion of the one-year anniversary in June of journalist Samir Kassir's murder.

WHY WAS MURR ATTACKED?

¶18. (S/NF) Given his family's pro-Syrian past, the question

remains why the Syrians would want him dead. Murr himself has a theory that is as plausible as any other we've heard: because Murr, as Minister of Interior in the last Hariri cabinet, ordered in September 2004 the arrests of the "Majdal Anjar gang," Sunni extremists linked to the Iraqi foreign fighter pipeline. While some of the plots of this gang -- blowing up the Italian and Ukrainian embassies in Beirut -- may not have been as operationally prepared as was argued at the time, the Majdal Anjar gang was involved in the Iraqi insurgency and was discovered to have connections to Rustom Ghazali, then Syria's strong man in Lebanon.

¶19. (S/NF) Despite the dangers of annoying the then-ubiquitous Syrian overlords, Murr backed up the ISF's detention of the gang, even once the ties to Ghazaleh and the Syrian regime were revealed. But, especially after one of the detainees died under mysterious circumstances (presumed to be torture), Murr faced death threats. When the Hariri cabinet resigned in October 2004, Murr fled with his family to Switzerland, where he remained until after the departure of the Syrian troops in April 2005.

MURR CARVES OUT MORE POWERFUL ROLE

¶20. (S/NF) Readily accessible and friendly to our interests, Murr has worked with us closely on a variety of security, intelligence, and counter-terrorism issues, proving to be politically courageous and supportive. The elite commando ISF Black Panthers unit in the ISF, the recipient for some of our ATA assistance, was set up under his direction when he was Minister of Interior. As Minister of Defense, he is a strong supporter of the LAF.

¶21. (S/NF) As an active, engaged minister who likes to insert himself into the details of security issues, he has broken with his predecessors, who saw their role as largely protocol-oriented, with the LAF commander a more powerful figure who in effect reported directly to the president. The international boycott of Lahoud, in fact, has encouraged Murr in his efforts to build a substantive role for himself, since foreign interlocutors now see Murr on security/defense issues they would have previously discussed with the president.

¶22. (S/NF) Our impression is that the leaders of the LAF -- Commander Michel Suleiman and G-2 (military intelligence) Commander Georges Khoury -- overcame whatever initial bureaucratic hesitations they might have had to accept the expanded role of the Minister of Defense as defined by Murr, especially given the vacuum in the discredited presidency. Repeatedly, in meetings with the Ambassador, Murr has received phone calls from Suleiman and Khoury (as well as from Ashraf Rifi, who officially reports to Fatfat, not Murr), suggesting positive and collaborative relations. Murr is an additional advocate for the LAF within the cabinet and with international partners.

¶23. (S/NF) Murr, however, has a tendency to want to impress visitors, and he frequently exaggerates information or speaks knowingly on military subjects on which he could be better briefed. On broad strategy and how politics interface with security policies, we have found Murr to be a credible interlocutor. But when it comes to precise details, we have learned to double-check what Murr tells us with those

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responsible for the issue in question.

DEALING WITH MURR IN WASHINGTON

¶24. (S/NF) Murr is one of the few politicians here -- Walid Jumblatt comes to mind as another -- who speaks candidly about Hizballah and who shares our concerns about Hizballah as an Iranian proxy. He also sees Sunni extremism as a real threat in Lebanon, albeit one on which the GOL has been doing

some work. But, unlike Jumblatt, Murr in general prefers to speak privately about Hizballah, lest he be seen as preparing the LAF to strike Hizballah militarily. (No one in Lebanon would support such a move. Even those who fear Hizballah, like Murr, have a greater fear: Lebanon's destabilization, which they believe military action against Hizballah would provoke in the current environment.)

¶25. (S/NF) Murr's hope is to modernize and strengthen the LAF so that Hizballah becomes weaker by comparison and so that the LAF is prepared operationally to exercise control over all Lebanese territory, once that mission becomes politically possible. To an unusual extent, Washington interlocutors will have the opportunity to talk about Hizballah candidly with a senior Lebanese figure, but we believe that Murr will open up more easily in restricted meetings where all but his closest aides are out of the room.

¶26. (S/NF) We suggest that, in the larger meetings, Washington interlocutors probe Murr on his plans to modernize the LAF and push for comprehensive security reform, drawing on the UK strategic assessment and thinking. While being reassured of U.S. support through Section 1206 and out-year FMF, Murr should also feel some pressure about the need to implement the National Dialogue's decision to disarm the Palestinians outside of the refugee camps. We do not expect Murr to bring anything specific on that issue to the table -- he is particularly worried about how long the LAF could sustain a gunbattle with the Palestinians, given the shortage of ammunition in LAF stocks -- but he should report back to the cabinet that our assistance is coming with the expectation the Lebanese will implement the political decisions taken regarding the Palestinians.

¶27. (S/NF) One specific area where we recommend pushing Murr hard in Washington -- as we are doing here -- is regarding south Lebanon, in the context of the anticipated renewal of UNIFIL: Murr should understand that we expect the joint GOL-UNIFIL planning unit recommended to Prime Minister Siniora by UNIFIL Commander Pellegrini should be stood up now (and which, to be serious and to address operational needs, should be under the LAF or MOD, not/not the MFA). Also, we recommend urging Murr to increase the operational size of the Joint Security Forces (ISF and LAF) in the south immediately to the 1,000-troop authorized level and to increase the JSF patrols. While the ISF nominally may already be at troop levels approaching the 1,000 authorized level, there are far fewer on the ground at any one time. In our view, Murr should focus on the JSF becoming an active, not a reactive, force. This may be an area where Murr could also be asked for his impression of the Lebanese National Dialogue discussions on national defense strategy. Both Hizballah and the Hariri-led March 14 representatives have made presentations on national defense strategy during the past two months.

¶28. (S/NF) Ideally, Murr should leave Washington with a promise -- as specific as possible -- about USG support to the LAF. Such a message will reassure the Christians in particular and the Lebanese more generally, and it will give Murr a tool he can use in trying to get others (Saudi Arabia, etc.) to offer assistance to the LAF. Strong support to the LAF through Murr's visit will demonstrate in a tangible way the President's firm and non-negotiable support to Lebanon. But Murr should also report back to the cabinet that, while the United States will be patient and does not want to push Lebanon toward destabilization, the Lebanese need to begin exercising responsibility for their own country, in accord with their own national dialogue and consistent with the international resolutions regarding Lebanon.

FELTMAN